

VZCZCXRO4454
PP RUEHAG RUEHROV
DE RUEHDM #0889/01 2421319
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 301319Z AUG 07
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4116
INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 5311
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0545
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000889

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

PARIS FOR WALLER; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/14/2017

TAGS: [ECON](#) [ENRG](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: EMBASSY TEAM VISITS SYRIAN NORTHEAST

REF: A. 06 DAMASCUS 1782

[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 574

[1](#)C. DAMASCUS 762

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, for reasons 1.4 b/d.

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary. PAO and Poloff visited the cities of Qamishli and Deir az-Zour as part of a PD led trip to archaeological sites in the Northeast of Syria, including one major site under excavation by UCLA. The trip afforded Emboffs the opportunity to examine the state of tourism sector development in the Northeast. In addition, Emboffs visited the cities of Qamishli and Deir az-Zour which are usually thought of as underdeveloped backwaters. Emboffs saw both positive and negative development indicators in the area such as a modern private university in Qamishli and some pockets of wealth in Deir az-Zour. At the same time, Deir az-Zour continues to be plagued by persistent power outages, pointing to the need for greater SARG attention. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) On August 11-13, the PAO and Poloff traveled to Northeast Syria using a visit to four important archaeological sites in northeast Syria, locally known as al-Jazira, or the [island](#) between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers as cover for a visit to this area of sensitivity to the SARG because of its large and restive Kurdish population. Emboffs visited the sites of Tell Brak, Mari, Dura Europas, and Tell Mozan. The remoteness of the excavations combined with the SARG,s apparent lack of investment in promoting the tourist sites results in little tourist traffic through the area.

[1](#)3. (C) The main focus of the trip was to visit a University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) excavation at Tell Mozan, the location of the ancient Hurian city Urkesh. Lead archaeologist, Dr. Giorgio Buccellati of UCLA, a naturalized Amcit, hosted Emboffs at the excavation. According to Buccellati, the Syrian government has been supportive of the excavation and has sent a number of high-level Syrian government officials to visit, including Vice President for Cultural Affairs Najah al-Attar and former Deputy Minister of Culture Riad Ismat, who is current Syrian Ambassador to Pakistan.

QAMISHLI AND DEIR AZ-ZOUR

QAMISHLI

[1](#)4. (SBU) Government spending in Qamishli, the major city in

the Kurd majority Northeast, lags well behind other parts of the country (ref A). Neglect from Damascus stems in part from Qamishli's remoteness and large non-Arab population. The region has been highly volatile since March 2004 when security forces used indiscriminate deadly force to put down massive Kurdish rioting that broke out after a soccer match. Approximately a year later in May of 2005, a popular Kurdish religious figure Sheikh Muhammad Khaznawi was assassinated. Although no one has been officially convicted of the murder, many Kurds point that finger at the regime. Despite the ongoing tensions, there appeared to be a distinct lack of an overt security presence in the streets of Qamishli. There was, however, a military base just outside of town. During a brief visit to the city, Emboffs saw unclean streets, a lack of new construction and an apparent lack of commercial activity lending credence to Qamishli's reputation as economically depressed.

15. (SBU) Emboffs visited the Qamishli branch of Mamoun Private University for Science and Technology (MUST) which is housed in a gleaming new three story building located 15 kilometers outside of Qamishli. (Note. There are also branches of the same university in Aleppo and Damascus. End Note.) The Qamishli campus was opened 10 months ago and its incoming class is comprised of approximately 400 students from across Syria, the limit allowed by the Ministry of Education. The university offers Bachelors degrees in computer science and engineering, communications, as well as small departments in the humanities and English. There are also plans to create departments in petrol-chemical engineering and agricultural engineering to take advantage of the region's oil, gas and agricultural resources. MUST designs its own curriculum, although the Ministry of

DAMASCUS 00000889 002 OF 002

Education must approve it. There was a distinct lack of lab facilities, with only a few rooms with circuit boards for student practice, possibly reflecting university founder and Syrian businessman Mamoun Hallaq's desire to create university graduates with practical skill such software programmers and network administrators rather than computer engineers.

DEIR AZ-ZOUR

16. (SBU) In general, government licensed investment projects often fail to get off the ground in the region (ref B). As a result, the power outages that annually plague Deir az-Zour during the summer months have been exacerbated this year by the ongoing electricity crisis throughout the country (ref C). Emboffs witnessed multiple power cuts in the city over the space of 24 hours, illustrating the scope of the problem.

17. (C) Yet, despite the lack of services there was significant new residential construction in the east of the town. The markets were well stocked with food and there was an abundance of high-end consumer goods like designer clothes and washing machines. Deir az-Zour was by far the more conservative of the two Northeastern cities Emboffs visited. Nearly all women were covered and many of the men opted for traditional Arab dress over western clothes.

18. (SBU) Comment. While its remoteness from Damascus and lack of government assistance has hampered the development of the Northeast, there are nonetheless some positive indicators in each of the cities we visited. The establishment of a private university in Qamishli may serve as a catalyst to bring talented young Syrians to the region, while at the same time teaching the local population job skills. In addition, Deir az-Zour exhibited a degree of wealth which was somewhat surprising given its continuing development challenges such as the numerous power outages.

CORBIN